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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2885

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2130

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 2193

RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 0312

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SINGAPORE 001285

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ASEAN PINR SN

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE MFA PERMSEC HO SAYS POSTPONING ASEAN SUMMIT UNTIL MARCH WOULD BE "A MISTAKE"

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Classified By: DCM Daniel Shields for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Delaying the ASEAN Summit until March due to political turmoil in Thailand would be a setback for Southeast Asia and would reinforce perceptions that ASEAN is a disorganized grouping, Peter Ho, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told United States Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs Scot Marciel in a December 4 meeting in Singapore. Ho doubted the Thais would be able to host the Summit even in March, and suggested the Summit should be held in January at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta or somewhere in Vietnam, given Vietnam's status as ASEAN Vice Chair. Commenting on the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, Ho said the death of a Singapore citizen during the attacks serves as a stark reminder to Singaporeans that the threat of terrorism has not abated. Ho also briefly touched on the political situation in Malaysia, China's shift in diplomacy towards Southeast Asia, the human rights situation in Burma and the prospects for China or India taking action on climate change.

End Summary.

ASEAN Summit: A Delay Would Undermine ASEAN

¶2. (C) Delaying the ASEAN Summit until March, as Thailand has proposed, would be a mistake, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Peter Ho told United States Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs Scot Marciel in a December 4 meeting. Thailand's domestic problems are undermining the progress of ASEAN and reinforcing a perception that ASEAN is a disorganized grouping, Ho lamented. The Thais will likely still be embroiled in their domestic political problems and may be unable, even in March, to successfully host the Summit, Ho said. It is imperative that the Summit be held sooner in order for ASEAN leaders to discuss the economic crisis and also launch the recently ratified ASEAN Charter, Ho said. Ho suggested that the Summit be held in January, and that Vietnam (as ASEAN Vice Chair) host the Summit or that it be held at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. Ho told Ambassador Marciel that officials in Malaysia, Japan and China (the latter two as part of the ASEAN Plus Three groupings) have all told Singapore they would be unable to attend a Summit held in March. Malaysia and Japan will likely hold elections in March, and China will hold its annual National People's Congress. Ho said ASEAN Foreign Ministers will meet December 15 in Jakarta to discuss

proposals for rescheduling the Summit. Ho said even if the Summit is delayed until March, the two ASEAN Free Trade Agreements (the ASEAN-India and ASEAN Australia/New Zealand FTAs) need to be signed at the first opportunity so that they can be implemented.

A Compelling Greek Tragedy is Unfolding in Thailand

¶3. (C) Commenting on Thailand's political crisis, Ho compared the political morass to "a compelling Greek tragedy." Both sides have dug in their heels and the situation is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. The Thai King might be the only person who can resolve the crisis, but he has chosen to remain silent until now. Unfortunately, there is a chance that the King will be ignored should he choose to speak, and that, Ho said, would be a disaster for Thailand.

¶4. (C) Commenting on the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute, Ho said the problem had its roots in Thailand's current political crisis. The opposition had tried to use the border dispute as a pretext to embarrass the government.

India: A Reminder that the Terrorist Threat has not Abated

¶5. (C) Ambassador Marciel expressed condolences over the death of a Singaporean hostage in the Mumbai terrorist attacks. Ho responded that the incident served as an unfortunate reminder that the terrorist threat has not abated. The incident would make it easier on the government to remind Singaporeans of the need to take the terrorism threat seriously.

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¶6. (C) Ho described the Indian response to the terrorist attacks as very disorganized, saying that Singapore officials in Mumbai observed "scenes of complete chaos." One problem is that India has not yet taken the terrorism threat sufficiently seriously, Ho said.

¶7. (C) Ho told Ambassador Marciel that Israeli officials complained to Singapore about how India mishandled the hostage crisis at the Jewish center. No attempt was made to negotiate with the hostage-takers and the Indian assault on the center was poorly planned and coordinated, Ho said.

¶8. (C) Ho thought there was little doubt that the terrorists came from Pakistan. He speculated that the potential political impact of the attacks could be a worsening of relations between India and Pakistan and expressed concern that the Pakistani Army might relax pressure on extremist strongholds in western Pakistan as it moved forces to its eastern frontier with India. Ho said there would likely be negligible economic impact on India, noting that the one area that might be affected, India's tourism industry, is not yet developed and is only a small part of the economy.

Malaysia: Weak Leadership Needs to Play to the Gallery

¶9. (C) The political situation in Malaysia has stabilized now that Abdullah's succession is clear and opposition leader Anwar has been weakened, Ho said. While a return to some form of Mahathirism is possible under Najib, Malaysia's main problem is one of weak leadership, Ho asserted. Malaysia's leaders are forced to play to the gallery and jump on the bandwagon of Malay rights. Malaysia's minorities have seen their political influence wane as their percentage of the population shrinks relative to Malays. In an effort to hedge against possible future turmoil, those ethnic Chinese who can move their money out of Malaysia are doing so, Ho noted.

China: No More Smiling Diplomacy

¶10. (C) While in the past China went to great lengths to assure ASEAN countries of the "peaceful rise of China," Ho asserted that Chinese diplomatic efforts in the region have now entered a new phase. China is now more focused on securing its strategic interests, which include access to resources and the protection of China's maritime trade routes. This shift has led to an increase in Vietnam-China tensions. While Vietnamese officials will not openly criticize China, they often privately express their fear of China's actions and intentions, Ho said. Vietnam's unwillingness to openly criticize China suggest that Vietnam's conduct of diplomacy is not yet fully mature, Ho asserted.

U.S. - ASEAN Relations

¶11. (C) Ho noted that although there has been much progress, the United States relationship with ASEAN has suffered from a series of missed opportunities, most recently the inability to schedule a meeting between the President and the "ASEAN 7" (ASEAN minus Burma, Laos and Cambodia) during APEC.

Burma

¶12. (C) Ambassador Marciel stressed that the human rights situation in Burma has taken a turn for the worse and that the junta's use of long jail sentences for opponents of the regime would in many cases amount to death sentences for the accused. PermSec Ho acknowledged that the situation in Burma is "a mess."

Climate Change

¶13. (C) China sees action on climate change as in its best interests, but will only act if the United States acts, Ho

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said. India will likely prove more intransigent on climate change, Ho stated.

¶14. (U) Ambassador Marciel cleared this cable.

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